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## Localities: Intercultural Poetics

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### **Abstract**

One of the prime concerns behind the compilation of this special poetry issue of Kunapipi is to challenge the colonial/post-colonial binary, and to bring into question both the discourse surrounding this construct and, indeed, the terminologies themselves. The questions are socio-political and linguistic, cultural and epistemological. By including poetry from a wide range of localities - geographical, conceptual, aesthetic, spiritual, cultural, and ethnological - I am attempting to deconstruct the question into its multi-directional component parts.

INTRODUCTION BY JOHN KINSELLA

# Localities: Intercultural Poetics

One of the prime concerns behind the compilation of this special poetry issue of *Kunapipi* is to challenge the colonial/post-colonial binary, and to bring into question both the discourse surrounding this construct and, indeed, the terminologies themselves. The questions are socio-political and linguistic, cultural and epistemological. By including poetry from a wide range of localities – geographical, conceptual, aesthetic, spiritual, cultural, and ethnological – I am attempting to deconstruct the question into its multi-directional component parts.

When I originally sent letters of invitation to poets, I was surprised to find that many of recipients questioned the legitimacy of the term 'post-colonial'. The questioning came on a variety of levels: whether any colony had indeed moved into a 'post' period; what the nature of the 'colonial' is in the first place; and the convenience of the terminology in defining and hegemonising a range of contradictory forces. The question of internal colonisations was most frequently mentioned: alternative threads working through and against the formation of a particular vernacular, the hybridising of the 'colonised' tongue/s, and the hybridising of the 'mother' tongue.

On an ethnic and cultural level, the poet Ai was concerned with a number of issues. She wrote: 'Post-colonial? Hmm... Does that destination cover Ai? I guess I am, if I think of America as a former colony. You do know that I am part Japanese, and that I am part black, Choctaw Indian, Southern Cheyenne, Dutch and Irish, don't you? Some anthologies mistakenly say I am part African. No, I am part American black. Anyway, I consider myself multiracial.' Ai went on to trace an Irish connection, and at least in terms of surnames, an English link. Such is the rhizomic nature of the colonising impulse. The question is one of cause and effect, of intention. Occupation/invansion becomes pivotal to locating the agitprop angle on the discourse.

Veronica Brady in her article "'The Dark Side of The Moon": Aboriginal Poetry', writes, 'For a non-Aboriginal critic to discuss Aboriginal poetry is therefore not a simple matter since it takes us to the frontier between cultures, a frontier, moreover, which, as we have said, is fraught with anxieties on one side and pain and growing anger on the other.' The tensions that exist in many of the poems in this collection arise out of numerous concerns of this nature, even where they are not on the surface level of the texts. There is an implicit knowledge of what has been done, what one might be doing, and how this informs poetic language.

The poems range from the delicate lyric to complex lingu-politico-mythical song constructs such as Nathaniel Mackey's 'Song of the Andoumboulo: 40', in which language reclaims spiritual connection, despite the weight of a 'central tradition', without didacticism. Douglas Barbour, in his 'Contemporary Canadian Poetry circa 1998: Some Notes', begins: 'Notes only, and from a position I tend to think of as on the margin. But I have been reminded all too often of the fact that my margin is pretty close to many other peoples' centres and so I can't even make that claim with any sense of real justification.'

The point is, there's always another centre, and the idea of a margin is a fluid one.

Mackey's poem recentres over and over, or maybe it simply absorbs or bypasses the centre by incorporating traditions and strengthening cultural identity in the process. Is this possible? I'd argue it is. The issues of mixing and hybridity, of blood and language, nationalism and traditionalism, are explored in a variety of ways throughout the poems and articles. But, significantly, a number of the pieces, such as Drew Milne's, Rod Mengham's, and Robert Crawford's examine *internal* movements of occupation and 'absence' within the texts themselves.

Tim Kendall's article on Plath's drafts is fascinating in the textual problems it poses, in the context of authenticity that must surround a volume such as this. Colonialism and post-coloniality become conceptual as well as geographic; the localities are fluid and interwoven. Metaphor, metonym, the mnemonic, accrued memory, subverted mythologies, interaction between domestic and historical places, invade the binary. Occupation, territorialisation, absence. This is what language does. The connections and movements in many of the poems included are subtle, and their presentation within the framework of this volume runs the risk of forced contextualisation. But poetry has the strength to resist and accept such readings, over and over. Nothing is in, and nothing is out. Robert Crawford writes in *Lilag*:

Mapped an scanned, a karaoke  
O gangrel souns I ken hae been

Mapread an spoken by my faither  
I mony a cawpissid bield...

So, you'll find Scots and Americans, Australians and English, Irish and Canadians, among other 'tags', and poets whose locality is indecisive. But questions of locality are ever-present. In her brilliant article "'Logocinéma of the Frontiersman": Eugene Jolas's Multilingual Poetics and its Legacies', Marjorie Perloff opens with 'Language as neurosis or language as "super-tongue for intercontinental expression"? For Eugene Jolas, a self-described "American in exile in the hybrid world of the Franco-German frontier, in a transitional region where people swayed to and from in cultural and political oscillation, in the twilight zone of the German and French languages" ... , language was clearly both.'

A questioning of borders. Of lingu-cultural sovereignties. Of a hybrid internationalism. Of a language of the avant-garde? In presenting poets from a wide range of localities, many of whom see themselves existing outside any kind of colonial/post-colonial framework, are we moving towards an 'internationalism' as an alternative, in which communication becomes identity, in which the macro absorbs the micro for the universal good? I hope not. Just another form of colonisation. The relationship needs to be more complex and interactive.

Perloff ends her article: 'Not the melting pot, one of Jolas's favorite images, but the particular values of a particular underrepresented culture, not the erasure of borders, but the focus on borders, not internationalism but national and ethnic awareness: this is the realm of *mots-frontiere* that has replaced Jolas's dream of a "new language", his "super-tongue for intercontinental expression". Indeed, "intercontinental", is now a word used sparingly and when it is, as in the case of those ICBMs with which we threaten weaker enemy nations, the vision is far from Utopian.' The question of centrality that arises in this conclusion, the national 'we', is the focal point through which all these pieces must be read. The distancing implicit in critical language is up for question, and the notion of the 'lyrical I' vulnerable in the poetry. It's not simply a question of beginnings and ends, and that's what is being worked against here.